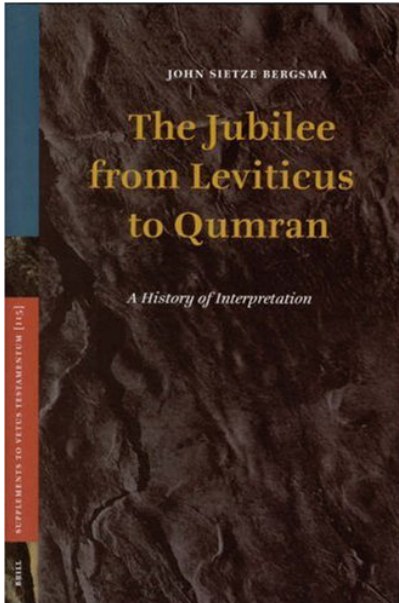


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**Bergsma, John Sietze**

***The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation***

Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 115

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What is at stake in this Notre Dame doctoral dissertation (advisor: James C. VanderKam) amounts to a delicate inquiry into the relationship between social institution, its textual documentation, and the subsequent history of (adapting, transforming) interpretations. In a way, the germinal Old Testament text Lev 25 is already part of this interpretative current, because the institution very likely preceded its documentation (see chs. 3 and 4). Thus, the Jubilee tradition altogether encompasses nearly five millennia of human history, from Sumerian times to the present, the campaign for relief of debts to the forty poorest nations in the “Jubilee” year A.D. 2000 being the most notable modern surge of that archaic liberationist idea. This is a worthwhile doctoral dissertation topic! John S. Bergsma acknowledges the enormous scope of his subject matter and sympathetically cuts back earlier ambitions to tackle it wholesale. For the time being he wants to investigate only the Old Testament developments of the “years of liberation,” stopping “short of the first century,” that is, the New Testament texts (1 n. 1)—a very prudent decision, although the interested reader would appreciate to learn more about Jubilee ideas in the Christian era.

Bergsma offers a short introductory chapter discussing previous research of the matter (Christoph Berner, *Jahre, Jahrwochen und Jubiläen: Heptadische Geschichtskonzeptionen*

*im antiken Judentum* [BZAW 363; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006] apparently has been a parallel project unknown to Bergsma; it neatly fits into his overall concept) as well as his own eclectic methodology. In his view, one should distinguish four dimensions of the Jubilee tradition: the actual “earnest” socioeconomic meaning, on the one hand, and eschatological, messianic, and chronological (including cultic-calendrical) reuses of the basic concept, on the other (2–3). The drama of that fluvial swell in Jubilee thinking is investigated through chapters 2–10; the concluding chapter 11 gives a brief summary (295–304).

Chapter 2, dedicated to “Antecedents of the Jubilee Legislation” (19–51), immediately reveals the complexity of the matter. Although ancient Near Eastern texts do not testify to an exact corollary of the Israelite Jubilee, there are six motifs of this institution clearly recognizable in a variety of Mesopotamian documents: freedom proclamations; sacred precincts and personal; seventh-month festivals; agrarian fallow-practice; redemption of inalienable property; and cyclical calendars of pentecontads (20, 20–36, 50–51). Each of these items deserves close attention, even more so the way they may have been twisted together into one concept and institution! The biblical antecedent par excellence is the (premonarchic! [41]) Covenant Code with its provisions of fallow years and liberation of debt-slaves (Exod 21:1–11; 23:10–11; pp. 37–50).

The crucial questions now are: When and under which circumstances did the complex Jubilee institution come about? How does Lev 25 relate to that “serious” sociological setup? Chapters 3 (“The Life-Setting [*Sitz-im-Leben*] of the Jubilee” [53–79]) and 4 (“The Jubilee as Text: Setting, Structure, Exegesis of Leviticus 25” [81–105]) try to give a plausible answer: The institution of “*jobel*-blowing” dates back to “preexilic, tribal Israel” (56) and was seriously designed to alleviate social-economic imbalances in Israelite society (56–75). Its documentation was achieved by the preexilic priesthood wanting to regulate cultic (Lev 1–16) and social (Lev 17–25) affairs of the Yahweh community (81–104). To complement this line of argument, it is argued that Deut 15, contrary to traditional scholarship, postdates Lev 25, addressing itself to the problems of urban property that had been left unsolved by the agrarian (priestly) legislators (ch. 5, pp. 125–46). The following two chapters fall in line with Bergsma’s vision of early social-economic (“earnest legislation”) use of the Jubilee idea: Chapter 6 deals with “Pertinent Texts in Kings and Jeremiah” (149–76), while chapter 7 discusses “The Jubilee in the Latter Prophets” (principally Ezekiel and Second/Third Isaiah [177–203]).

Many details needed to be discussed here; some of them represent, without doubt, due to the author’s painstaking scrutiny, brilliant expertise, and daring imagination, real assets to biblical scholarship. Concentrating on the main plot, however, of Bergsma’s reconstruction, one must at least raise a series of questions in regard to the Israelite

Jubilee and its presentation in the Hebrew Scripture: Does literary evidence really allow us to undo the old (basically Wellhausenian) sequence of liberation texts (Exod 21:1–11; Deut 15; Lev 25)? What does a really serious socioeconomic analysis of ancient Near Eastern societies tell us about Mesopotamian urbanism, monetarism, and state and imperial politics, in contrast to Israelite alleged agrarian, clannish, kingless, and priestly social structures? More pointedly, can the Jubilee institution be an outcome of preexilic tribalism? Does it not presuppose a highly developed, bank-centered, and intensely urban system of loans on interest (see Neh 5:1–5)? How do we evaluate the ideological/theological motivations of Jubilee ordinances that possibly led to practical impasses (such as doubled fallow years at the end of the Jubilee cycle)? Is it really plausible to postulate an early date for Lev 25 when assuming such a complex growing together of different “liberation” motifs as pointed out by Bergsma? What seems strange, indeed, is the fact that the author refers a great deal to clan and family terminology in Lev 25 but fails to evaluate thoroughly the socioeconomic conditions in Israel at the Jubilee’s installation.

Be it as it may, the author makes his way into the “Writings” of the canon (ch. 8; pp. 205–32), the Jewish postcanonical literature (ch. 9; Jubilees, Apocalypse of Enoch, Testament of Levi [233–50]), and the Qumran writings, among others 11QMelchizedek (251–94). With this part of his interesting study Bergsma enters into the wide field of reinterpretations, be they calendrical, eschatological, or messianic in character. His general conclusions (ch. 11; pp. 295–304) emphasize the original meaning of the Jubilee: it “seems to have arisen in early Israelite tribal society.... The conceptual basis of the legislation is that the entire territory controlled by Israel was analogous to a temple estate, and the Israelites themselves were sacred slaves” (295). “[T]he legislator provided for Israelite society a periodic decree of *andurarum*, namely, the jubilee. ... Israel was a kingless society.... Therefore the proclamation of the jubilee was tied to a cultic calendar with ancient West Semitic roots” (p. 295). Already the original provisions of liberation and redemption carry “certain ‘eschatological’ overtones,” namely, the memory of longings for freedom during Israel’s enslavement in Egypt, the almost utopian hope for liberation after forty-nine years of forced labor, and the veneration of the ancestral land in order to maintain the good standing of the deceased (296). Thus, in Bergsma’s vision, both the institution of the Jubilee and its representation in textual form lend themselves to further, spiritual applications of the idea that Yahweh takes care of his followers in the distant future and throughout the ages.

Bergsma’s careful study surely will provoke new discussions about the origin and use of a very powerful Hebrew text. (A few errors should be corrected, such as two grammatical mishaps in German quotations on page 72 [line 4: “das Heiligkeitsgesetz ... ist zu verstehen als Versuch”; line 28: “[das Gesetz] ... Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass es schon aus der Zeit ... stammt.”].)